

Elaine Cardenas
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Teacher-Librarians Teaching Technology Ethics: Yes, It's Our Job

by Doug Johnson

In his introduction, Doug Johnson states that teacher librarian's jobs have evolved with respect to safe and ethical technology use. Traditionally we have been *watchdogs*, but now he is calling us to step up and emphasize our role as *teachers* of safe and ethical technology use. Mr. Johnson suggests that every day we face four major ethical challenges in our roles as librarians.

The first challenge is: **"Encouraging intellectual freedom in a filtered environment"**. In 2006 My Space came under fire from several news programs. These programs detailed the "dangers" of social networking. Subsequently, many districts blocked access to all Web 2.0 applications. CIPA (Children's Internet Protection Act) requires districts that receive federal funding must use internet filtering. Mr. Johnson maintains that despite the requirement to filter, it's still possible to encourage intellectual freedom. He points out that Internet filtering products have different settings. His suggestion is that we advocate for settings that are the least restrictive. Also, he suggests that there be at least one machine available for the librarian that is not filtered at all.

His other point with respect to intellectual freedom involved teaching adults the difference between "a *format* and the *content* contained in a format". What he says is that Wikis and blogs are what he calls "content neutral. They are a format meant to display content. The information they display may be either appropriate or inappropriate for students. Further, he maintains that if the same standards for blocking were applied to print materials, we would block all magazines. He uses *Playboy* as an example because of its content.

Ethical Implications: In essence, filtering precludes the possibility of intellectual freedom. I really wasn't sure if we use filters all over our own campus. I discovered that we use some filters, but that we can remove them for particular assignments. Coincidentally, I saw this post in the tech section of our school web page this morning regarding filtering. *All you often filtered when surfing the web here at St. Matthew's?* It goes on to explain how we can search on an unfiltered computer by using a different IP address. We are fortunate in that we have autonomy in our school; we don't have to answer to a district. I can imagine the frustration of having some higher entity dictate what we can and can't do.

As teacher librarians we absolutely should be involved in writing policy. I concur wholeheartedly with Mr. Johnson regarding the need to teach students to be “self-regulating Internet users.” At some point in time, these students will need this skill whether it be at our school or somewhere else.

The second challenge is: **“Preventing plagiarism made easier through digital resources”**. As teacher librarians we should be teaching students to respect other’s property. Also we should be teaching them how to protect their own property using copyright laws. Johnson suggests that the best way to prevent plagiarism before it happens is to:

- Teach what plagiarism is, how to cite all formats, how to paraphrase
- Have a “cheating” policy that clearly defines plagiarism and consequences
- Create assignments “relevant to student’s lives”

Ethical Implications: Just as we teach students to correctly cite print sources, we must likewise teach students the same skills with respect to the Internet. The Internet poses an even greater challenge just because it is so easy to copy and paste. Often, I believe the plagiarism is unintentional. Students copy the information into a document and plan to put it in their own words at a later time and then they forget. We teach the students to put the information into their own words at the note-taking stage of the process for this reason. Also, if they are doing assignments that interest them, hopefully they will be motivated to do more than just copy and paste.

The third challenge is: **“Growing concerns over privacy and confidentiality of networked information”**. Students should be taught to “protect their own privacy (safety) and honor the privacy of others (ethics). With respect to safety, students need to know that strangers need to remain strangers and that personal information should not be shared with them. They also should be aware of the fact that information on the Internet is collected and used by various businesses and organizations. Lastly, students should be taught to protect privacy of others. Information on a computer screen does not mean it’s public.

Ethical Implications: The Internet comes with its own set of problems with respect to teaching. Most students have ready access to the Internet and they are not always supervised. To me, a big part of the problem is that the adults don’t understand what’s available on the Internet and what the implications are for their children/students. I believe that the school needs to step up and teach the faculty and parents about the Internet. Sites that seem innocuous (EG Club Penguin) may still be sites where the children are at risk. Unless someone teaches the parents and faculty, they can’t monitor/protect the children.

The last challenge is **“Need for information evaluation skills of materials on the free Internet”**. Students must be able to evaluate information they find on the internet. They need to look at who wrote the information and what their qualifications are. They should consider if the viewpoint presented has a bias. They should check to see how

frequently the information is updated. Too often because kids see things in print, they accept it as correct or true. We must teach them otherwise when it comes to the Internet. Before using Internet information they must scrutinize it and evaluate it.

In his conclusion Mr. Johnson encourages us to be proactive with respect to teaching ethics. Often students know more than we do with respect to technology. However, it's crucial that we teach them not just skills, but the "right" use of technology.

Ethical Implications: I'm not sure how it happened, but I started off reading stories to children and am now spending more time in the computer lab than in the rest of the library. It's a sign of the times. I've had to learn myself how to evaluate information. It really is a crucial skill to sift through the vast amount of information and find something that is worthwhile. In this day and age, this may well be the most important skill we teach our students.

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